

Australia is sliding backwards in efforts to prevent obesity

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Australia is currently lagging in the fight to tackle obesity and create healthier food environments, according to the latest scorecard of government performance.

The Food Policy Index, first developed and implemented in 2017, benchmarks the Australian government on its implementation of globally recommended policies to improve population diets.

The latest assessment of government, launched at the [International Congress on Obesity](#) in Melbourne this week, found major weaknesses in Australian government policy relative to international best practice, with limited policy progress in the five years up until June 2021.

Associate Professor Gary Sacks from Deakin University's Institute for Health Transformation ([IHT](#)) and Co-Director of IHT's Global Centre for Preventative Health and Nutrition ([GLOBE](#)) said the lack of action meant that Australia was going backwards.

"The former Federal Government released key strategies including the *National Preventive Health Strategy* and the *National Obesity Strategy*, but this has yet to result in any changes on the ground," Associate Professor Sacks said.

"Other countries have recognised the public health crisis they're facing due to excessive rates of obesity, but Australian governments have been dozing off at the dinner table. Sleepy strategies are not enough – we need real change to help Australians improve their diets."

"Unhealthy eating habits and obesity are leading contributors to poor health outcomes in Australia, and are highly costly to individuals, communities, the health-care system and the economy.

"Nearly 65 per cent of Australian adults, and 25 per cent of Australian children are overweight or obese. Less than seven per cent of people in Australia consume a healthy diet consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

"These statistics haven't improved over the past few years, despite obesity prevention being a national health priority," Associate Professor Sacks said.

Drawing on the expertise of 84 experts from 37 organisations across Australia, the Food Policy Index report identifies key policy recommendations for the government, prioritised based on their perceived importance and feasibility over the next three years (2022-2025).

Identified priority areas for action at the federal level include:

- Protecting children from exposure to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages through comprehensive and consistent national regulations,
- Implementing a health levy on sugar-sweetened beverages and other unhealthy food, whilst addressing the affordability of healthy food,
- Improving food labelling by mandating the Health Star Rating scheme and requiring warning labels on products high in added sugar, sodium and/or saturated fat.

Jane Martin, who leads the Obesity Policy Coalition, one of the partners in the study, said an urgent imperative was for government to protect children from unhealthy food marketing.

"Australian children should be able to watch an online video, their favourite TV show, or participate in sport without being bombarded with ads for junk food. For too long these companies have been left to make up their own sham rules, which are weak and ineffective," Ms Martin said.

“Other governments around the world are taking strong action to protect children from seeing this marketing as they go about their daily lives.

“There is also strong support from the Australian community for governments to impose higher standards on marketing to support children’s health and wellbeing,” Ms Martin said.

For more information about the Food Policy Index, go to: <https://www.foodpolicyindex.org.au/>

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